

Forging a women's united front: Chinese elite women's networks for national salvation and resistance 1932-1938

FORGING A WOMEN'S UNITED FRONT

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Abstract

Focusing on Chinese elite women who had gravitated towards national affairs in the pre-war urban sites of eastern China and who migrated to Wuhan after the outbreak of the War of Resistance (1937-1945), this article analyses the emergence, development and integration of their socio-political networks for the purpose of promoting women's participation in national salvation, against a backdrop of the deepening national crisis in the 1930s. I argue that two years before the Second KMT-CCP United Front was officially formed, these elite women, hailing from diverse social and political backgrounds and different professions, had already established their own leadership during the national salvation movement and called for a women's unite front. Therefore, rather than being a political rhetoric enhanced under the auspices of the KMT-CCP alliance, the women's united front served as an important institution in which Chinese elite women identified and empowered themselves at a local and then national level, across and beyond the geo-political boundaries. I conclude that the birth and evolution of this women's united front, which have been neglected in the historiography of China's War of Resistance, is crucial to the understanding of the unsettling negotiation, communication and cooperation among the various forces signed up for the cause of national salvation in the 1930s, and to the interpretation of popular resistance before the war.

Introduction

In 1937, the War of Resistance (1937-1945) in China abruptly changed the geo-political landscape of the lower Yangtze region. In less than half a year, both Shanghai and Nanjing fell to Japanese troops, and the Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek was temporarily moved to Wuhan, a tri-city complex of Hankou, Wuchang and Hanyang in the eastern Jiangnan plain in central China. The Japanese occupation of Shanghai and Nanjing in late 1937 not only caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians but also created approximately half a million refugees who poured into the nearby provinces in the

hinterland. Among those who fled Shanghai and Nanjing to follow the Nationalist government to Wuhan, were the most prominent intellectuals and social elites of the country.¹ Examining the populace that defended Greater Wuhan in 1938, Stephen MacKinnon has observed the extraordinarily high number of educated elites who arrived in the city, including most of the important names in the worlds of Chinese literature, art, drama and academic scholarship of this time.² Wuhan therefore not only symbolized a hopelessly 'romantic and heroic defence', but also an opening political and cultural space for the Chinese elite to re-identify with their present and most urgent national duties, and to reposition themselves in the fast changing geopolitical landscape of wartime China.³

Like their male peers, those elite women who converged on the city also engaged in political mobilization in the cause of national resistance and in the production and dissemination of resistance ideologies. Travelling across the geographic borders from one city to another, from the occupied coastal areas to China's interior, and from their hometown to a completely new place and novel environment, to a great extent, facilitated their salvation movement crossing the political and gender divide.⁴ Along with the many and various united-fronts formed among resistance activists from different political parties, social circles and professions, a women's united front (妇女界的联合战线) was promoted by these elite women who migrated to Wuhan.⁵ When Shen Ziju, the leader of the Women's National Salvation Association (妇女界救国会 WNSA) and editor of the famous Shanghai journal *Women's Life* (妇女生活), arrived in Wuhan in 1938, she was excited about the possibilities to be discovered and unravelled for forging a unity of Chinese women for national salvation and resistance:

Hankou now is such a sea of people gathering together from different places, that you could be surprised by whom you meet [...] The Japanese enemies have driven us together from different places and positions, and perhaps the real unity of Chinese women will become a reality. In the past, there

¹ S. MacKinnon, 'Refugee flight at the outset of Anti-Japanese War', in *Scars of war: The Impact of Warfare on Modern China*, D. Lary and S. MacKinnon (eds), UBS Press, Vancouver, 2001, p. 119.

² Ibid., p. 126.

³ S. MacKinnon, *Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, p. 54.

⁴ As J. Judge argues, travelling to a new and foreign environment far from home made it easier for elite women to escape family duties, challenge gender boundaries and to participate in nationalist movements. Please see J. Judge, 'The culturally contested student body: Nü xuesheng at the turn of the twentieth century', in *Performing 'Nation': Gender Politics in Literature, Theatre, and the Visual Arts of China and Japan, 1880-1940*, D. Croissant, C. V. Yeh and J. S. Mostow (eds), Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2008, pp. 122-128.

⁵ As pointed out by P. M. Coble, an array of organizations in 1930s Shanghai – student groups, chambers of commerce, banking associations, bar associations, the Young Men's Christian Association, and even the Green Gang – formed their own united fronts and joined the national salvation movements. P. M. Coble, 'The national salvation movement and social networks in Republic China Shanghai' in *At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks and State-Building in Republican Shanghai*, N. Dillon and J. C. Oi (eds), Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008, pp. 118-130.

were antagonisms among us both in theory and in practice, but now it becomes possible for us to overcome the barriers to communicate with each other and to fight against enemies from outside.⁶

By ‘the antagonisms among us both in theory and in practice’, Shen Zijiu indicated the tension between women leaders in the Kuomintang (or the Nationalist Party, hereafter the KMT) and women salvationists, many of whom were affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), due to Chiang Kai-shek’s tenacious interests in annihilating communists and his unwillingness to fight Japan before 1937. With the worsening national crisis, Chiang’s non-resistance government was not only challenged by salvation activists like Shen Zijiu in the heart of the KMT-controlled eastern China, but also by the military alliance of the Manchurian forces led by General Zhang Xueliang, the North-western force led by General Yang Hucheng and the communist forces. The hastened military advances of Japan, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in particular, finally forced Chiang to abolish the non-resistance policy and to accept an anti-Japanese United Front composed of all political parties, including his long-time enemy, the CCP, by the end of 1937.⁷ Therefore, during the heroic defence of Greater Wuhan, a united wartime mobilization under the auspices the Second KMT-CCP United Front further facilitated elite women’s political engagement and cooperation.

However, the women’s united front claimed by Shen Zijiu and her peers who migrated to Wuhan in 1938 should not be simply perceived as a result of the official KMT-CCP alliance. This article attempts to argue that, long before the outbreak of the war, elite women in the urban sites of eastern China had already gravitated to national affairs when the nation’s crisis was looming large. Like Shen Zijiu, these elite women became activists or salvationists during the national salvation movement and, despite their different professional and socio-political backgrounds, formed their own leadership and integrated their networks in the cause of national salvation by the end of 1935. Through circulating their salvation networks and ideas in the 1930s, Chinese elite women not only empowered themselves both socially and politically, but also called for a women’s united front that surpasses the boundaries of gender and class, and that crosses China’s geo-political borders.

The existing scholarship has already notified women’s activism during the War of Resistance, highlighting their participation in a variety of wartime political parties, organizations and institutions. Louise Edwards’ book *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, Li Danke’s *Echoes of Chongqing* and Xia Rong’s *The ‘New Life Movement’ Women’s Advisory Council and the War of Resistance* have made significant contributions in this regard.⁸

⁶ Z. Shen, ‘Wo zouchu le Shanghai’ (I left Shanghai), in *Kangzhan zhongde nüzhangshi (Women Warriors in the War of Resistance)*, Z. Shen (ed.), Wartime Press, 1938, pp. 113-114.

⁷ For more information about Chiang Kai-shek’s non-resistance policy and the formation of the Second KMT-CCP United Front, please see H. J. Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China 1925-1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, pp. 170-203.

⁸ D. Li’s research, using oral histories, into the roles of women in wartime Chongqing, examines their political activism within the underground CCP, the National Salvation Association and the Women’s Advisory Council. R. Xia’s monograph on the Women’s Advisory Council provides detailed information on the activities

However, very little attention has been paid to women's pre-war communication and networking in response to the exigencies of national crisis: how were new spaces opened up in the urban sites of eastern China for women's social and political activism? Who became the activists or salvationists? And how did these women salvationists, despite their diverse social and political backgrounds and different professions, expand and connect their networks to advocate a women's unity for national salvation and resistance?

Indeed, when scholars discuss the popular resistance before the war, the focus has been mainly placed on the leadership of the CCP in promoting the national salvation movement and cultivating the Second KMT-CCP United Front.⁹ Based on the oral account of a communist woman, Wang Zheng points out that, 'with the worsening national crisis, increasing number of city dwellers – especially the educated people – were attracted to the CCP call for resistance as well as to its nationalism.'¹⁰ And when the enlargement of social space in the national salvation movement conflated women's self-interests and those of the nation, many elite women also responded to and supported the CCP's line in the movement.¹¹ Therefore, from a party-political perspective, it appears only natural that, after the KMT-CCP United Front had been established, elite women of different political backgrounds would automatically unite together, and that their united front was merely a by-product of the official military-political alliance formed between the two major parties at the time.

Since the status of Chinese women has long been deeply interwoven with discourses of national liberation, it is no great surprise that their history has been shaped by the jostling between Nationalist interests and communist interests for control of the narrative – with each party, at various times, gaining the ideological upper hand.¹² Discussing the uneasy relationship between nationalism, communism and feminism in the history of Chinese women, Elisabeth Croll and Christina Gilmartin both acknowledge that women's roles and

of women participants between 1938 and 1945. L. Edwards' research on women's suffrage movement shows women leaders' persevering negotiations for women's equal political rights and higher election rate at the People's Political Council, the so-called China's 'wartime parliament', during the War of Resistance. D. Li, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2010; R. Xia, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui yu kangri zhanzheng (The Women's Advisory Council and the War of Resistance)*, People's Press, Beijing, 2010; and L. Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2008, pp. 195-231.

⁹ In 1935, the CCP published the '1 August Announcement', which proposed an anti-Japanese alliance between different political parties and forces, and stimulated the nationwide movements for national salvation and resistance. For more information, see G. Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 2-3; and K. Shum, *The Chinese Communists' Road to Power: The Anti-Japanese National United Front, 1935-1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, pp. 21-58.

¹⁰ Z. Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999, p. 252.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-252.

¹² G. Hershatler and Z. Wang, 'Chinese history: A useful category of gender analysis'. *American Historical Review*, vol. 113, issue 5, 2008, pp. 1404-1421.

identities were constantly redefined and reconstructed to serve the political needs of the party.¹³ Louise Edwards has further claimed that Chinese women activists viewed political parties as the foundation of power and endorsed them as fundamental to their own development and to their nation's survival.¹⁴

This party-political perspective, when applied to elite women's political activism before the war, has also emphasized the rivalry between the KMT and the CCP, rather than the role of women in the ongoing political communication, negotiation and cooperation between the two. In this respect, the mobilization of women is often examined with a presumption that it was either a process initiated by communist revolution, or the result of political manoeuvre under the KMT leadership.¹⁵ The dynamics of the national salvation movement during which different women's forces co-opted each other for their own social and political empowerment have not yet been thoroughly researched. Largely neglected, too, are the networks of elite women that already emerged and evolved in the 1930s, and which came to extend well beyond the political structures provided by either the KMT or the CCP. Focusing on these diverse but interwoven networks initiated by Chinese elite women, this article aims to eschew a confining party-political perspective, and is instead committed, as Li Danke puts it, to moving the modern history of women in China 'beyond the dichotomy of CCP versus KMT'.¹⁶

The term 'elite women' is used to convey a combined meaning of two Chinese terms: upper-class women (上层妇女) and well-educated and intelligent women (知识妇女), which were interchangeably used in 1930s China, in contrast with a more generally defined lower-class women (下层妇女) or working-class women (劳动妇女).¹⁷ I use this term to distinguish a group of educated women who grew up in middle and upper class families, educated to at least college level, and who were therefore equipped to participate in public affairs actively and independently. Indeed, as Louise Edwards points out, the excellent, albeit scarce, scholarship on Chinese women's movements during the years prior to 1949 has, for a

¹³ E. J. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, Routledge, USA and Canada, 2013, pp. 1-5; and C. K. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

¹⁴ L. Edwards, 'Moving from the vote into citizenship: crafting Chinese women's political citizenship', in *Women and Gender in Chinese Studies*, N. Spakowski and C. Milwertz (eds), Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2006, p. 12.

¹⁵ For instance, writing about women's political mobilization on the eve of the May Thirtieth Movement, Gilmartin underlines the absolute leadership of the communist leader Xiang Jingyu in developing a network among women students. And Croll, when examining the development of the Women's Advisory Council, identifies this growing women's network as merely a KMT organization whose agendas were tailored to fit KMT's political programmes and ideologies. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, pp. 122-131; Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, pp. 178-184.

¹⁶ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, p. 9.

¹⁷ For example, as revealed in a contemporary document, 'our guest Shi Liang pointed out the different tasks for intelligent women (知识妇女) and for lower-class women (下层妇女) during the War of Resistance.' W. Zhu, 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui chenglidahui jilue' (The short summary of the inaugural meeting of the Chinese Women's Community). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-260, October 1937, p. 421.

number of reasons, marginalized these elite women's activities. Denigrating them as examples of 'bourgeois feminism', it has focused instead on women workers or those involved in the communist movement.¹⁸ The existing literature on the topic of women's emancipation in modern China has further separated the Chinese elite and Chinese women, seeing them as two unrelated social groups. The former, represented by educated, socially influential and politically powerful men, have been seen as the producers and reformers of social norms and ideologies, whilst the latter have frequently been presented as the passive objects of various social and political campaigns. Therefore, when featured in their own history, Chinese elite women are either carelessly subsumed into the study of wider male-dominated intelligentsias, or simply categorized as subordinated women.¹⁹

This article seeks to identify Chinese elite women both collectively and individually in the enlarged urban spaces for their knowledge-making, network-building and political engagement, against the backdrop of national salvation and resistance in 1930s China. As teachers, writers, lawyers, artists, politicians, civil servants and wives of higher government officials, they had developed sophisticated social and political networks in China's growing metropolises long before the outbreak of the war. Although the agendas and memberships of their networks were extremely diverse in the early 1930s – some were reading and publishing societies developed by female writers and editors, some were political-studies networks dominated by female political activists, and some were simply 'housewife' networks composed of wives of the most prominent political and cultural figures – they gradually intersected, overlapped and merged as the national crisis deepened. From Shanghai and Nanjing to Wuhan, these elite women expanded and integrated their networks firstly within the WNSA and later in the Women's Advisory Council (妇女指导委员会). And by doing so, they firmly claimed their own united front at a local and then national level, across and beyond China's geo-political boundaries. To understand this 'women's unite front' not simply as wartime political rhetoric, but as an evolving institution in which Shen Zijiu and her peers identified and empowered themselves, we need to begin with the first network Shen formed in Shanghai – the *Women's Life* society.

Shanghai 1932-1937: Shen Zijiu and *Women's Life* society

With a degree in Fine Art from Japan, Shen Zijiu returned to China in 1926. She became a teacher first in Hangzhou High School, and then in Songjiang Girl's Normal School of Jiangsu Province, teaching art and home domestics. Like many educated women of her age who had experienced the May Fourth movement in 1919 and had been educated abroad, Shen supported women's independence in society and understood the nation had been thrown into crisis by the events in Manchuria. In Hangzhou and Songjiang, Shen inspired many of her female students who shared her ambitions and then followed in her footsteps; Ji Hong, Peng

¹⁸ Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, p. 16.

¹⁹ Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 13; Y. Ma, *Women Journalists and Feminism in China, 1898-1937*, Cambria Press, Amherst, 2010, pp. 7-8.

Zigang and Hu Ziyang were all Shen's students who later assisted Shen with her journal *Women's Life* in Shanghai and became prominent women activists during the war.

According to her students, Shen Zijiū was more than just a teacher who taught girls how to manage their houses and beautify themselves. Against the patriarchal trend of 'Women going back home' endorsed by the KMT New Life Movement in the 1930s, Shen insisted that her students meet regularly at school reading societies and discuss the active roles women could play in attempting to tackle the national crisis.²⁰ It was in those reading societies on campus that young educated women such as Shen Zijiū, Hu Ziyang and Ji Hong established their early connections and grew their ambitions to achieve something special in life beyond managing their houses.²¹

Shanghai after the 28 January Incident in 1932 was no longer a paradise for entertainment, leisure and selfish pleasures.²² Although the overwhelming commercials in *Shen Bao* (申报), the most influential newspaper in Shanghai, still tried to sell the luxurious life style of the city even after Manchuria fell to Japan, newspapers in Shanghai as important media and spaces for public communication were being transformed day by day in the shadow of the war.²³ Shi Liangcai, the chief manager of *Shen Bao* and a famous bourgeois patriot in the city, decided to launch a supplement called *Free Talk* (自由谈) to circulate and discuss public opinions on the deepening national crisis. *Free Talk* quickly turned into an open forum amongst the most critical minds in Shanghai, where many famous writers in town, including Lu Xun and Mao Dun, contributed their articles and made comments on current national affairs.²⁴ In early 1934, encouraged by the responses and support from not only male but also increasingly female readers, Shi Liangcai decided to change the Sunday edition of *Free Talk* to a women's forum named *Women's Garden* (妇女园地) – a new space for public discussion opened directly to the women readers of *Shen Bao*. As a loyal reader and enthusiastic contributor, Shen Zijiū was then employed by Shi as the chief editor of *Women's Garden*. On 21 February, *Women's Garden* launched its first issue, and soon it became a platform for Shanghai women to

²⁰ For more information about the KMT New Life Movement and its impact on the women's movement, see Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, pp. 185-188.

²¹ H. Ji, 'Zijiū laoshi yu Funü Shenghuo' (Shen Zijiū and *Women's Life*), in *Nüjie wenhua zhanshi Shen Zijiū* (Shen Zijiū: A Female Warrior of Culture), B. Dong (ed.), Chinese Women's Press, Beijing, 1991, p. 41; and J. Huang, 'Fengyun suiyue – Shen Zijiū yu Funü Shenghuo' (Life as wind and cloud – Shen Zijiū and *Women's Life*). *Xinguan* (New Observation), vol. 18, 1983, p. 52.

²² Known as the Shanghai Incident, on 28 January 1932, Japanese marines invaded Shanghai and encountered resistance of the Nineteenth Route Army of the KMT. The military conflicts lasted from 28 January to 3 March. On 5 May 1932, the Songhu Truce Agreement was signed after negotiation and mediation between China, Japan, the UK, the US, France and other countries. See C. Herriot, 'Beyond glory: civilians, combatants, and society during the Battle of Shanghai'. *War and Society*, Vol. 31, 2012, pp. 106-135.

²³ *Shen Bao*, copies between 1932 and 1934, Shanghai Library Collections.

²⁴ Z. Yang, 'Nüjie yinghao Shen Zijiū' (Shen Zijiū: the example of extraordinary women). *Gujintan* (Past and Present Forum), vol. 4, 2007, p. 45.

establish their own voices and express their concerns of both women's and the nation's future destiny.²⁵

Becoming an editor was an important step for Shen to develop a women's network, not only in terms of the topics she brought into her writings and discussions, but also in terms of the communication she started with other elite women from different professional and political backgrounds. Such networking demonstrates that political diversity had already existed in women's societies long before the Second United-Front was officially formed. One evening in late February of 1934 – not long after the first issue of *Women's Garden* had been published – a young woman found Shen Zijiu's residence and introduced herself to Shen. Described by Shen as a 'slim and elegant young lady in her half-old dark brown qipao dress', Du Junhui, a communist activist who had joined the Communist party in 1928, came to offer her assistance.²⁶ Without explaining to Shen her political views, Du introduced herself with a 100,000-word essay entitled 'A speech on current women's issues', which was soon published in *Women's Garden* as a serial. Du Junhui then introduced Luo Qiong, another pro-communist activist to Shen Zijiu. Given their shared desire for women's active role in public and national affairs, both Du and Luo were quickly absorbed into the editing team of *Women's Garden*.²⁷

However, just when Shen Zijiu's network based on *Women's Garden* started to grow, the chief manager of *Shen Bao*, Shi Liangcai, was assassinated by KMT secret agents for his criticism of non-resistance policy and his sympathy towards salvation forces, including the CCP.²⁸ As a consequence, *Women's Garden* was terminated. Seeing that *Shen Bao* could no longer support their salvation ideas and networks, Shen Zijiu, Du Junhui and Luo Xiong decided to establish an independent women's journal. On 1 July 1935, the advertisement for the inaugural issue of *Women's Life* was posted in *Shen Bao*. The launch issue of *Women's Life* received articles from many famous names in Shanghai including, among others, writers Mao Dun and Bai Wei and film director Shen Xilin. Themes and topics covered by these articles included 'should women return to home?', 'modern marriage and divorce' and 'women and war'.²⁹ In the foreword of this launch issue, Shen Zijiu articulated the goal of *Women's Life*:

Chinese women are currently living under double oppressions: externally caused by the imperialist invasion which has been intensified day by day; and internally due to the reviving patriarchal trend [...] however, the obedience of women is not the solution to national crisis.

²⁵ Huang, 'Fengyun suiyue', pp. 52-53.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁸ Yang, 'Nüjie yinghao Shen Zijiu', p. 45.

²⁹ *Shen Bao*, 1 July 1935, p. 17.

Facing these two oppressions, how should a woman live an independent life, how should she position herself in the crisis-torn society, and how can all women join hands towards a better future? These are the questions *Women's Life* attempts to answer.³⁰

Instead of seeking financial support from either the KMT authority or any other political parties, Shen Zijiu affiliated her *Women's Life* with Life Bookstore (生活书店), a popular publisher and bookseller in 1930s Shanghai run by the influential journalist and editor Zou Taofen, who was also a staunch supporter of national salvation and resistance.³¹ The smooth and successful transition from *Women's Garden* to the independent *Women's Life* shows that elite women in Shanghai had already established an effective network to protect and advertise their publications. Through publishing and the communication between editors, contributors and readers, Shen Zijiu's *Women's Life* not only constituted an important forum for women in Shanghai to associate their worries and anxieties about everyday life with the burgeoning warfare after the 28 January Incident, but also brought together elite women from different professional and political backgrounds who shared the same view on women's responsibility for national salvation. As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this article, women's reading and publishing societies like *Women's Life* were essential to the expansion and connection of their salvation networks.

Apart from the development of women's publishing and reading societies, early 1930s Shanghai also saw the emergence of a variety of women's career groups and 'Taitai' clubs (太太俱乐部 clubs of privileged and upper-class wives), with overlapping memberships and leaderships. It was common at the time for women members of one society to participate in activities organized by other societies. Some groups and organizations eventually merged into each other in order to enhance the leadership and pursue a new agenda. In her memoir, Hu Xiaqing specifically mentioned a women's organization in Shanghai called the Association for Housewives. Albeit its name, this 'Taitai' club had attracted many educated professionals such as the aforementioned Shen Zijiu, Luo Qiong, Luo Shuzhang and Ding Huihan, who maintained close cooperation with the editorial staff of *Women's Garden* and *Women's Life*. By the end of 1935, this 'Taitai' club had already been transformed into a research society that concerned itself with women's issues and current national affairs.³² Another 'Taitai' club, the Bee Club, which merged into the Young Women's Club at the end of 1936, also absorbed members from different professional and political backgrounds including actresses Chen Bo'er, Yu Liqun (married the famous writer Guo Moruo in 1939) and Lan Ping (Jiang Qing, married Mao Zedong in 1938), the well-known female writer Bai Wei and communist activists Du Junhui and Zhu Wenyang. As soon as the WNSA was established in Shanghai, the Young Women's Club also supported Shen Zijiu's leadership

³⁰ Z. Shen, the foreword of the launch issue, *Women's Life*, vol. 1, issue 1, 1935, p. 2.

³¹ Yang, 'Nüjie yinghao Shen Zijiu', p. 46. For more information about Zou Taofen and the Life Bookstore, please see W. Yeh, 'Progressive journalism and Shanghai's petty urbanities: Zou Taofen and the Shenghuo Enterprise, 1926-1945', in *Shanghai Sojourners*, F. Jr. Wakeman and W. Yeh (eds), Institute of East Asian Studies, Berkeley, 1992, pp. 186-238.

³² 'The extract from Hu Xiaqing's memoirs'. Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, pp. 88-92.

and organized demonstrations to mobilize local women to participate in the national salvation movement.³³

These women's organizations and societies with diverse origins in Shanghai served not only as channels for career women and privileged upper-class wives to enhance their social power, but also as platforms for them to expand their connections with not one, but a variety of political parties and factions for advocating national salvation. For example, the Chinese Women's Community (中华妇女互助会) – established by Tian Shujun, a concubine of the Shanghai Garrison Commander Yang Hu, and sponsored by a group of rich wives of high-ranking KMT officials – did not turn into a club exclusively for rich KMT wives to socialize each other and enjoy their leisure time. When Tian Shujun firstly decided to establish a women's organization, she was only hoping it to be a solution to her endangered marriage. Being one of the eight wives married to the Shanghai Garrison commander, Tian's position at home was frequently threatened by the concubines of her husband.³⁴ For Tian, initiating a women's organization in pre-war Shanghai was more for the purpose of lifting herself up in wider social arenas than for advocating political unification and national salvation. Nevertheless, according to Zhu Wenyang's memoir, both the CCP and the Central Club (C.C.) Clique of the KMT infiltrated this organization, despite its seemingly non-political appearance and agenda.³⁵ Involved in this Community were also salvation activists Ding Huihan, Han Xuezhong and Zhu Wenyang herself, who utilized these new social and political linkages they made in the Community to protect and expand their salvation network. By the late 1937, the Community had also been transformed into a salvation organization which dedicated itself to making winter vests for the Chinese forces defending Shanghai.³⁶

These diverse but interconnected networks being developed among Chinese elite women in pre-war Shanghai proved to be essential to the dissemination of their salvation ideas, especially when the hitherto non-resistance government adhered to strict press censorship to control public opinion. Although these elite women hailing from different backgrounds had not yet forged their shared concerns into a united women's organization for national salvation at this early stage, it is evident that salvationists like Shen Zijiu already received support not only from her communist friends, but also from KMT insiders and even Shanghai's powerful gangsters. As Shen Zijiu noted:

³³ 'Qingnian funü julebu jianjie' (A brief introduction of the Shanghai Young Women's Club). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, p. 25.

³⁴ 'Tian Shujun qiren' (About Tian Shujun). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-260, undated, p. 424.

³⁵ The C. C. Clique, or the Central Club Clique, was one of the political factions within the KMT. It was led by the brothers Chen Guofu and Chen Lifu who were friends with Chiang Kai-shek. For more information, please see L. E. Eastman, J. Chen, S. Pepper and L. P. Van Slyke, *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-1949*, The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1991, p. 27.

³⁶ 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui jianshi' (A short history of the Chinese Women's Community). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-260, August 1937, pp. 416-418; 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui chenglidahui jilue', pp. 421-422.

In order to make the publication of *Women's Life* escape the strict KMT censorship, we sent some of our friends to deal with KMT officials so that they would only pick up several small problems but allow the whole article to be published. Also, we managed to gain some important contacts with Du Yuesheng's Green Gang (青帮), and managed to build a direct connection with a Mrs He, a head in the Red Gang (洪帮).³⁷ Because of our wide connections, we could always solve problems by ourselves.³⁸

By the time of the 13 August Shanghai Incident in 1937,³⁹ there were already over twenty women's societies, groups and organizations in Shanghai.⁴⁰ The social and political relations reflected in their memberships were, as demonstrated above, extremely sophisticated. It is therefore clear that on the eve of the War of Resistance, elite women – whether they were non-aligned career women, KMT wives, undercover communists, salvationists, or the so-called C.C. women of the right-wing KMT – were committed to the expansion of their networks in order to empower themselves both socially and politically. The extension of their networks and the dissemination of their ideas were not confined by political; nor, as we shall now see, were they confined by geographic boundaries. Not far from Shanghai, Nanjing, the capital of the Nationalist government, marked a second hub of elite women's networks, and the centre of the later far-reaching national salvation movement.

Nanjing 1933-1937: Cao Mengjun and *New Women* society

As in Shanghai, the salvation networks of elite women in Nanjing also originated from local reading and publishing societies that discussed current affairs, especially the deepening national crisis. In the autumn of 1933, the KMT legislator Wang Kunlun, his sister Wang Feng and his girlfriend Cao Mengjun, among a few other intellectuals and scholars in Nanjing, secretly founded a reading society to study Marxism and to analyse national and international matters. In order to develop this political-studies network among knowledgeable women in the capital, Cao Mengjun and Wang Feng soon invited Tan Tiwu, a female civil servant working at the KMT Ministry of the Interior, and female journalists Ji Hong, Hu

³⁷ The Green Gang and the Red Gang have a long history that can be traced back to the early Qing Dynasty. The Red Gang was founded earlier than the Green Gang, originally as a secret society created to revolt against the Qing government. For more information, please see B. G. Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919-1937*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

³⁸ 'Huiyi Funü Yuandi yu Funü Shenghuo' (Memories about *Women's Garden* and *Women's Life*). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, p. 16.

³⁹ On 13 August 1937, Japanese troops invaded Shanghai, thus starting the three month-long Battle of Shanghai. On 12 November 1937, Shanghai fell to Japan. For more information, please see F. Jr. Wakeman, *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime 1937-1941*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 6.

⁴⁰ 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui chenglidahui jilue', p. 421.

Jibang and Tan Dexian to join their group.⁴¹ While Cao Mengjun and Tan Tiwu already knew each other from university, others had previously been working together at Madame Chiang Kai-shek's 'New Life Movement' Women's Advisory Council.⁴² Again, like those in Shanghai, local women's societies in Nanjing were not directly supported by any political parties in the early 1930s but emerged through the interconnected friendships, relationships and kinships of their members.

Cao Mengjun in Nanjing, like Shen Ziju in Shanghai, became the key person of local elite women's networks. With gentle eyes, thin lips and a slim figure – 'a true beauty' in Shen Ziju's words, Cao Mengjun did not see the goal of life was to find a rich husband like many beautiful Chinese women in the 1930s would believe.⁴³ Instead, she impressed her friends and colleagues with her strong character and full passion for developing her own career. In her friend Tan Dexian's eyes, Cao Mengjun was born to be a women's leader:

She is an advocate of education for women's independence and strong character [...] She would never let love or relationship hamper her career. When she is working, she devotes full effort no matter the task is big or small. And within a group, she is always the one who catches people's attention. She speaks fast and works fast; she handles everything efficiently and prudently. She has the same incredible passion for learning as for working!⁴⁴

With her 'incredible passion for learning as for working', Cao Mengjun became the leader of the women's reading society in Nanjing. However, compared with that in Shanghai, women's groups and societies in the Nationalist capital were more strictly monitored and controlled. KMT women's leader Tang Guozhen, who headed the KMT Nanjing Municipal Women's Community (南京市妇女会) under the jurisdiction of the KMT Central Mass Movement Directory Committee, had attempted to supervise other women's organizations in the city and to contain women's salvation activities.⁴⁵ Dissatisfied with the performance of the Nanjing Municipal Women's Community, Cao Mengjun and her peers in the reading society decided to challenge its authority and force it to reform for the purpose of national salvation. The reading society therefore organized a public election campaign among women in Nanjing to vote against the current leadership of Tang Guozhen. Unfortunately, the election was sabotaged by Tang, who brought a number of school pupils to vote against Cao.

⁴¹ H. Lu, 'Jieshao liwei Tan Tiwu nüshi' (About Tan Tiwu, a member of the Legislative Committee). *Xiandian Funü (Modern Women)*, vol. 9, issue 5, 1947, pp. 9-10.

⁴² X. Li, 'Ding Ling, Gu Jiegang yanzhongde Tan Tiwu' (Tan Tiwu in the eyes of Ding Ling and Gu Jiegang). *Book Town Editorial*, vol. 3, 2010, pp. 61-63.

⁴³ D. Tan, 'Cao Mengjun yinxiangji' (My impression of Cao Mengjun). *Women's Life*, vol. 3, issue 1, 1936, p. 46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ *Jiangsu funü yundongshi 1919-1949 (The Historical Documents of the Women's Movement in Jiangsu 1919-1949)*, Zhongguo funü Press, Beijing, 1995, p. 137.

In view of the difficulty of replacing Tang, Cao Mengjun decided to establish an independent women's organization in Nanjing to promote her own agenda.⁴⁶

Competitions as such were often interpreted in CCP historiographies as the 'contradiction' between those power-craving KMT stalwarts, such as Tang Guozhen, and those so-called 'progressive women' (进步妇女), such as Cao Mengjun. And Cao, a salvation activist who had been affiliated with the CCP since 1925, seemed to fit the profile of a 'progressive' undercover communist who firmly fights against the 'devious' KMT women leaders. However, overstressing these elite women's political affiliation with either the ruling KMT or the underground CCP would lead to partial understanding of their intertwined salvation networks before the war. Albeit the prevailing tension between some women leaders in the KMT and the salvationists affiliated with the CCP during the national salvation movement, party-political cleavage was never a defining feature of elite women's public communication and engagement in the 1930s.

Although Cao Mengjun joined the CCP in 1925 when she was enrolled in Peking University, her social and political relations were never confined to the CCP. During the period of the National Revolution (1924-1927), both the KMT and the CCP saw rapid increase in their female members and these women political activists formed interconnected working relationships and friendships under the leadership of the KMT Central Women's Department.⁴⁷ After the National Revolution failed in 1927, Cao Mengjun went to Nanjing, where she worked for the KMT Ministry of Industry while her close friend and previous schoolmate from Peking University, Tan Tiwu, worked for the Ministry of the Interior as a KMT civil servant.⁴⁸ Cao's personal relationship with Wang Kunlun further helped her to extend her networks across different political parties and groups. The couple made friends with many prominent politicians and social figures in the capital city, including the famous ex-warlord General Feng Yuxiang and his wife Li Dequan.⁴⁹ It would be unthinkable for Cao Mengjun to challenge Tang Guozhen's leadership at the Nanjing Municipal Women's Community without the broad personal linkages she had already built in Nanjing. The fact that Cao could immediately and successfully register her independent organization with the KMT Nanjing Municipal Social Bureau further indicates that she, like Shen Ziju in Shanghai, developed a sophisticated network of social and political relations to endorse the dissemination of her salvation ideas.

On 2 September 1934, Cao Mengjun's Nanjing Women's Association for Cultural Promotion (南京妇女文化促进会 WACP) was established in the capital, with its office set up at Number 80 Dashugen near the beautiful Xuanwu Lake. Just as how Shen Ziju expanded her network in Shanghai by publishing *Women's Life*, Cao Mengjun also sought to enhance the influence and connections of the WACP through publishing. In 1935, *New Women* (新妇女), as the weekly supplement of the popular Nanjing newspaper *Xinmin Bao*

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ma, *Women Journalists and Feminism in China 1898-1937*, p. 205. C. K. Gilmartin, *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 195-225.

⁴⁸ Li, 'Ding Ling, Gu Jiegang yanzhongde Tan Tiwu', pp. 61-63.

⁴⁹ Z. Wang, *Wang Kunlun*, Huashan Wenyi Press, Hebei, 1997, p. 122.

(新民报), was launched as the organ of the WACP. Over 100 women activists in town from different professions and political backgrounds gradually gravitated towards Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society for the purpose of studying national affairs, researching women's issues and reforming women's lives.⁵⁰ *New Women* society soon echoed Shen Zijiu's *Women's Life* in criticising traditional gender mores and advocating women's participation in national salvation. At the one-year anniversary meeting of the WACP, Cao Mengjun made it clear that staying at home as a good wife and wise mother was not what women should do in the face of national crisis:

In the face of national crisis, we need every citizen's effort to save the nation. However, there are still stubborn and wicked thoughts trying to stop us from our duties and forcing us back home to become good mothers and wives – don't they [the ideas of women going back home] sound ridiculous at this moment? For the future of the women's movement, we women must not slow down; and for our participation in national salvation we must conquer all the difficulties.⁵¹

The development of Shen Zijiu's *Women's Life* society in Shanghai and Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society in Nanjing demonstrates Chinese elite women's own initiatives in protesting the discourse of 'women going back home' endorsed by the KMT New Life Movement and in participating in public discussions of national affairs, despite the lukewarm or at times hostile responses from the government. Instead of attaching their societies to any political parties, Shen Zijiu and Cao Mengjun relied on their diverse but interwoven networks to communicate beyond party lines and to disseminate their salvation ideas. With the deepening national crisis, the urban sites of Shanghai and Nanjing also provided these professional elites – teachers, writers, editors, journalists, lawyers, publishers and civil servants – with an enlarged space to empower themselves through publishing, knowledge-making and network-building. It is therefore not coincident that, as we will see in the remainder of this article, through the establishment of Women's National Salvation Associations in Shanghai and Nanjing, Chinese elite women not only further associated their feminist concerns with their duties towards the nation, but also connected and integrated their networks to form a women's united front.

A tale of two cities: The Women's National Salvation Association

Parks M. Coble has argued that: 'personal network of connections was as critical to jump-starting the salvationist campaign as enlisting formal organization.'⁵² The development of Women's National Salvation Associations in Nanjing and Shanghai indeed benefited from the tightened personal networks among salvation activists between the two cities. And their 'tale of two cities' all began with Wang Kunlun's 'family get-together for peach tasting'.

⁵⁰ *Jiangsu funü yundongshi 1919-1949*, p. 137.

⁵¹ M. Cao, '1935 nian de huigu' (The summary of the year 1935). *Xinmin Bao*, 1 January 1936.

⁵² Coble, 'The National Salvation Movement and Social Networks in Republic China Shanghai', p. 118.

Like many KMT higher officials living and working in Nanjing, Wang Kunlun also had a residence in Shanghai, which served as his 'salon de conversation' for socialising and discussing political affairs with his close friends. Shen Zijiu and Hu Ziyang were both Wang's acquaintances in Shanghai.⁵³ It is likely that in the early 1930s, Wang Kunlun's relatives Wang Feng and Cao Mengjun already through him maintained contact with those prominent women salvationists in Shanghai. In the summer of 1935, Ji Hong, the journalist who had been an active member of Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society, decided to leave Nanjing for Shanghai to assist Shen Zijiu, her previous teacher at Songjiang Girl's School. She soon joined Shen's reading society and became an editor of *Women's Life*.⁵⁴ The personal relations between Shen Zijiu and Ji Hong added another important link between elite women in Nanjing and those in Shanghai. Through publishing and the expansion of their reading societies, connections between women's networks in the two cities were gradually forged, and elite women of different professional and political backgrounds started to synchronize their actions for national salvation.

On occasion, these connections were cemented through the social events that occurred on the side-lines of more formal, male-dominated, political gatherings. In August 1935, Wang Kunlun and members of his Marxist study group were invited by the Culture Working Committee (文化工作委员会) of the CCP to discuss the CCP's call to 'stop domestic conflicts and unite against Japan', a call that created the primary prerequisite for the actual establishment of the Second KMT-CCP United Front. In the name of a 'family get-together to taste peaches' among Wang Kunlun's families and friends, a private and exclusive meeting was organized at Wanfang House (万方楼) by the Tai Lake of Wuxi city. This meeting provided elite women in eastern China with an excellent opportunity to meet each other in person. Cao Mengjun, Wang Feng and Hu Jibang from Nanjing, Shen Zijiu and Chen Bo'er from Shanghai all joined the discussion. They reported on the achievements made by women's societies in Nanjing and Shanghai, and proposed to tighten the links between the two cities under a women's united front for national salvation and resistance. These elite women came up with the idea of establishing Women's National Salvation Associations (WNSA) both in Nanjing and Shanghai.⁵⁵

On 30 November 1935, Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society organized a public forum in Nanjing to discuss the formation of a women's association for national salvation and resistance against Japan. The forum attracted about 400 women representatives from all walks of life and resulted in the founding of the Nanjing WNSA.⁵⁶ Soon after the Nanjing WNSA was established, Cao Mengjun and Hu Jibang travelled to Shanghai to meet with Shen Zijiu, Du Junhui and Hu Ziyang, the leading members of the *Women's Life* society, as

⁵³ Wang, *Wang Kunlun*, p. 110.

⁵⁴ Huang, 'Fengyun suiyue', p. 56.

⁵⁵ *Jiangsu funü yundongshi*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

well as the well-known female lawyer Shi Liang, who then, at the end of 1935, formed a preparatory committee for the founding of the Shanghai WNSA.⁵⁷

The urban spaces of eastern China conveniently lent itself to the development of elite women's salvation networks. The same social strata these educated women elites belonged to and the similar life interests they shared played important roles in their early communication and networking for national salvation, regardless of the difference in their professional and political backgrounds. The majority of elite women active in 1930s Shanghai and Nanjing, such as Shen Ziji and Cao Mengjun, were all socially well-connected and financially well-off. They regularly managed their activities in the most expensive places of the city. Casual meetings at home and dinners outside provided them with opportunities to meet other women activists and social elites in this region. The Shanghai Godly Vegetarian Restaurant located on Huanghe Road became one of the places where they met regularly to exchange ideas and make new friends. Apart from meeting at restaurants and cafés, they often hosted events at Ding Huihan's house on Xiafei Road (Avenue Joffre, nicknamed Shanghai's Avenue des Champs-Élysées) in the French Concession to avoid suspicion of conducting communist activities.⁵⁸

It is interesting to note that while the urban spaces functioned as essential nodal points through which the public engagement and networking of Chinese elite women became more expansive, they still operated, in another sense, to confine such activities. As Shi Liang remembered, the preparatory committee of Shanghai WNSA chose Godly Vegetarian Restaurant in Shanghai as their meeting venue, not only due to the fact that an old friend was working there and the prices were reasonable, but also because they did not have many other options, as they realized no native place (会馆/同乡会) was willing to provide them with a venue for their meetings.⁵⁹ Although Shi Liang did not clarify why the ubiquitous native places in Shanghai all had refused to host them, one possible explanation is that the conservative communities in Shanghai still held derogatory attitudes towards women's activities in public.⁶⁰ Consequently, the committee members organized their preparatory meetings either at the Godly or at some member's home until they officially established the Shanghai WNSA on 20 December 1935 and set up an office at the Young Men's Christian Association on Sichuan Road.⁶¹

By the end of 1935, despite the government's persistent non-resistance policy and the occasional gender barrier they encountered in the still conservative Chinese communities, Chinese elite women had already spread their salvation networks across the major cities in eastern China. Cao Mengjun, Tan Tiwu and Ji Hong from Nanjing, Shen Ziji, Shi Liang, Du

⁵⁷ W. Ding, 'Guotongqu funü jiuguohui he kangri jiuwang yundong' (Women's Salvation Association and the national resistance movement in the KMT-controlled areas). *Jilin University Journal of Social Science*, vol. 6, 1993, p. 68.

⁵⁸ 'The extract from Hu Xiaqing's memoirs', pp. 88-92.

⁵⁹ L. Shi, *Shi Liang Zishu (Shi Liang's Autobiography)*, Zhongguo wenshi Press, Beijing, 1987, p. 22.

⁶⁰ B. Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 308.

⁶¹ 'The extract from Hu Xiaqing's memoirs', pp. 88-92.

Junhui, Luo Qiong and Luo Shuzhang from Shanghai and Liu Qingyang from Beiping gradually connected their local networks through the national salvation movement and declared their political goals:

To firmly maintain the integrity of Chinese territory and sovereignty;

To denounce secret foreign affairs and to deny any pacts or agreements that would harm the integrity of Chinese territory and sovereignty;

To denounce any executive organizations controlled by foreigners inside of China;

To centralize military forces and financial means to resist the enemies, to take down puppet authorities and to recover the lost territory in Manchuria;

To harshly punish traitors;

To claim the right to freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of association;

To request immediate release of patriotic students in Beiping and punishment upon the military police who perpetrated the arrests and violence;

To mobilize all women of the nation to unite together and to implement our propositions for national salvation.⁶²

Following the establishment of the WNSAs in Nanjing and Shanghai, a national leadership was finalized on 31 May 1936 to promote the national salvation movement more broadly. Women salvationists Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang and Liu Qingyang, as well as the political socialites Song Qingling (the elder sister of Madame Chiang and the widow of Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China) and He Xiangning (the widow of KMT leader Liao Zhongkai) gained their positions in the 15-people standing committee of the All-China National Salvation Association (NSA).⁶³ At this stage, the NSA was a loose political organization which opened its doors to almost every patriotic Chinese citizen regardless of their occupations and political alignments.⁶⁴ As one contemporary source recorded, 'apart from the majority membership being non-partisans, members of the KMT, the CCP, the National Socialist Party, the National Revolutionary League and the Third Party all have taken part in.'⁶⁵

For elite women, the multi-party political framework of the NSA provided an inclusive path through which they could participate in national salvation. Given its dedication to, and concrete practice of, saving the Chinese nation in the face of the Japanese aggression, it appealed to elite women as a platform to extend their networks outside the direct aegis of the

⁶² 'Shanghai funü jiuguo lianhehui xuanyan, 21-12-1935' (The statement of the Shanghai Women's National Salvation Association, 21 December 1935). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, 1936, pp. 58-59.

⁶³ J. Zhang, *Zhongguo minzhu dangpai shi* (*The History of Chinese Democratic Parties*), Heilongjiang People's Press, Harbin, 2006, p. 140.

⁶⁴ For more information about the National Salvation Association, please see P. M. Coble, *Facing Japan: Chinese Politics and Japanese Imperialism, 1931-1937*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 335-342.

⁶⁵ Z. Zhang, *Kangzhan zhongde zhengdang he paibie* (*The Parties and Factions during the War of Resistance*), Dushu and Shenghuo Press, Shanghai, 1939, p. 107.

KMT and the CCP.⁶⁶ Thus nearly two years before the anti-Japanese United Front was officially formed between the KMT and the CCP, Chinese elite women had already established their own leadership for national salvation and proclaimed their duties towards the country. As suggested by the founding statement of the WNSA, despite their different professional, social and political backgrounds, Chinese elite women were ready to realize a women's united front and to mobilize all women of the nation for national salvation. And with the outbreak of the War of Resistance, the heroic defence of Wuhan in 1938 provided them with the perfect opportunity to formalize their united front at the national level.

Wuhan 1938: Formalising a women's united front

After the fall of Shanghai and Nanjing in December 1937, Wuhan became for ten months the unofficial capital of an independent wartime China and the centre of national resistance. Here, the Nationalist government finally committed itself to a unified mobilization for national resistance. Not only was the geo-political landscape reshaped during the wartime mobilization and migration for resistance, but also the mass culture: through choral singing, drama performances and publication of various journals and newspapers – ranging from the communist newspaper *Xinhua Ribao* (新华日报) to *Kangzhan Xiangdao* (抗战向导) by the KMT and in between the publications from liberal intellectuals such as Zou Taofen's Life publications – people from all walks of life were included in the producing of a 'resistance' culture.⁶⁷ Wuhan became a centre for such nationalist political and cultural production and likewise an enlarging space crucial to Chinese elite women, who also moved here one after another, between late 1937 and early 1938.

Indeed, the tri-city became a veritable Mecca for wartime women's activism: the Chinese Women's Association of War Relief and Self-defence for the Army in Resistance (中国妇女慰劳抗敌将士总会) moved here from Shanghai, with its branches set up in Hankou and Wuchang; the Hubei Provincial Women's Wartime Service Group (湖北省妇女战时工作团) established itself in Wuchang; while the Young Women's Christian Association (基督教女青年会 YWCA), the Wuhan Women's Resistance Support Association (武汉妇女抗敌后援会), and the Hankou branch of Hubei Provincial Women's Wartime Service Group (湖北省妇女战时工作团汉口分团) also became active in Hankou.⁶⁸ To cooperate militarily and politically with the KMT in the Nationalist-run areas, the CCP established the Wuhan Office of the Eighth Route Army and the Yangtze Bureau. On 18 December 1937, Zhou Enlai, Bo Gu, Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu arrived in Wuhan to lead the CCP Wuhan Office. To

⁶⁶ N. Zhang, 'Wo he jiu huohui' (I and the National Salvation Association). *Zhonghuaminguo shiliao congkao* (*The Collection of Historical Materials on Republican China*), no. 6, 1980, p. 34.

⁶⁷ D. Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937-1945*, Cambridge University Press, USA, 2010, pp. 54-56; and MacKinnon, *Wuhan, 1938*, pp. 62-82.

⁶⁸ Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai', pp. 112-113.

assist with women's mobilization in this region, communist women leaders Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu also formed a women's committee under the Yangtze Bureau.⁶⁹

Arrived in January 1938, Shen Zijiu took her journal *Women's Life* all the way from Shanghai to Wuhan. Approximately one month later Shi Liang also arrived after a short stay in Hong Kong, where she helped with establishing local women's salvation organizations.⁷⁰ Liu Qingyang from Tianjin, Peng Zigang from Beiping, Cao Mengjun and Ji Hong from Nanjing had already arrived in Wuhan by the end of 1937. Other members of the *Women's Life* society such as Du Junhui, Chen Bo'er, Luo Qiong and Luo Shuzhang subsequently joined them in the city. Local women leaders and activists in Wuhan such as Li Wenyi and Yang Moxia were also quickly absorbed into this expanding women's network for national salvation and resistance.⁷¹

Wuhan became thus a city of national unification for elite women, who were forced to converge on it as the Japanese occupied more and more of eastern China. The freezing temperatures of January 1938 and an unfamiliar environment did not prevent these newcomers from meeting each other frequently. Shen Zijiu could not help running into old friends from Shanghai and Nanjing, with whom she soon restored her *Women's Life* forums at the YWCA in Wuhan:

How could I expect to see Ms. Tang Guozhen again in Wuhan after our last meeting in Nanjing before Manchuria fell to Japan? Ms. Tang introduced me to Ms. Xu Kairui from the KMT Central Women's Department, as well as other KMT women leaders from the Chinese Women's Association of War Relief and Self-defence for the Army in Resistance...⁷²

From Shen Zijiu's point of view, the only obstacle that had thwarted a women's united front – the previous antagonisms between KMT leaders and women salvationists – seemed to have disappeared in Wuhan. Tang Guozhen, the aforementioned KMT 'stalwart' who had confronted Cao Mengjun in Nanjing, was also absorbed into this growing women's united front for national resistance. One explanation could be that KMT women leaders only became more willing to co-opt other women's forces after the official anti-Japanese United Front had been formed. But it is important to note that Tang Guozhen had never been an outsider of the extensive social and political networks maintained by women salvationists in the early 1930s. Not only did Tang meet with Shen Zijiu in the early 1930s, she was also one of Cao Mengjun's acquaintances within the KMT before the fall of the capital. In this regard, their pre-war antagonisms should be understood as an integral component of the women's united front that was evolving through the unsettling negotiation, communication and cooperation between the various women's forces in the 1930s.

⁶⁹ G. Li, 'Kangzhan chuqi changjiangju lingdao xiade funügongzuo' (Women's work led by the Yangtze Bureau at the beginning of the War of Resistance). *Funü Xueyue (Women's Academy)*, vo. 4, 1991, pp. 29-30.

⁷⁰ 'The introduction of Shi Liang', materials collected by Y. Fei. Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, pp. 72-76.

⁷¹ Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai', pp. 112-113.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 113-114.

Instead of being forced upon them by either the KMT or the CCP after the outbreak of the war, this women's united front was expanded by Shen Zijiu and her peers based on their own substantial salvation networks. Luo Qiong recalled how Shen Zijiu used various social events to refresh her old contacts and attract new ones: 'As the chief editor of *Women's Life*, Shen Zijiu organized meetings of different scales and types amongst upper-class women in Wuhan; she also participated in various forums and tea parties to expand social connections with women from different professions.'⁷³ It was at one of these tea parties organized by the National Council on Foreign Relations that communist women leaders Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu were both introduced to Shen:

At this moment, someone introduced a new friend to me, 'this is Ms. Deng Yingchao.' In front of me was a lady who appeared to be firm and robust [...] Then she pointed at another lady who was in her military uniform and looked very pretty, 'this is Ms. Meng Qingshu, the wife of Chen Shaoyu (Wang Ming).' I could feel my blood fluxing in my body and rushing toward my cheeks. After the meeting, Ji Hong asked why I looked so excited, I told her: 'today's meeting is so fascinating. Here we met KMT women leaders, CCP women leaders as well as local women activists in Wuhan. Their passion is burning me; don't you feel the same?'⁷⁴

Propelled by such passion, Chinese elite women who had migrated from the urban sites of eastern China to Wuhan further formalized their united front at the national level. In May 1938, Madame Chiang Kai-shek organized a national women's forum in the Lushan Mountain, a beautiful resort about 300 kilometres away from Wuhan. 58 women leaders and activists from different regions and political backgrounds were invited, including 18 from Hankou, eight from Nanchang, six from Hong Kong, four each from Chongqing, Changsha and Guangzhou, three each from Chengdu and Guangxi, and two each from Yunnan, Guizhou, Fujian and Guling.⁷⁵ The aforementioned WNSA leaders Shen Zijiu, Shi Liang and Liu Qingyang, KMT leaders Tang Guozhen and Xu Kairui, communist leaders Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu, as well as a number of non-partisan professionals were all invited to this forum to contribute their ideas.⁷⁶

Based on the agreement reached at the Lushan Women's Summit, Madame Chiang's Women's Advisory Council (WAC) was transformed from a 'New Life Movement' institution to a cross-party national women's organization for national resistance in Wuhan. The primary focus of the WAC was changed from 'improving women's lives and directing their personal development' to 'directing women on the issues of resistance and national reconstruction'.⁷⁷ New departments were created to improve the function of the WAC in the

⁷³ Q. Luo, 'Shen Zijiu zai Shanghai he Wuhan de rizi li' (Shen Zijiu in Shanghai and Wuhan). *Qunyan* (*Popular Tribune*), vol. 10, 1989, p. 28.

⁷⁴ Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai', p. 114.

⁷⁵ 'Funü tanhuahui gongzuobaogao' (The work report of the Women's Forum), 20 May 1938, Chongqing Library Republican-era Collections.

⁷⁶ Xia, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui yu kangri zhanzheng*, pp. 108-111.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

areas of war release, member training, cultural undertakings, battlefield service and communication. Significant changes were also made to the organization's personnel arrangements: CCP members Deng Yingchao, Meng Qingshu, and Kang Keqing were selected into the ten-people standing committee, while WNSA members Shen Zijiu, Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang and Liu Qingyang were selected into its directory committee composed of 36 members. Albeit under the leadership of Madame Chiang, the restructured WAC was not dominated by KMT women leaders. Only three of its nine departments were chaired by KMT members, the rest were directed by women leaders from the WNSA and non-aligned elite women: Shi Liang was appointed as the director of the Liaison Committee, Liu Qingyang as the director in charge of member training, and Shen Zijiu, given her great contribution to the *Women's Life* society, was appointed as the director of public cultural undertakings.⁷⁸

WAC Department	Chief Director	Political Background
Culture	Shen Zijiu	WNSA
Liaison	Shi Liang	WNSA
Training	Liu Qingyang	WNSA
Release	Tang Guozhen	KMT
Battlefield Service	Chen Yiyun	KMT
Life Guidance	Huang Peilan	KMT
Administration	Xie Lanyu	Non-partisan
Production	Yu Yingtang	Non-partisan
Refugee Children	Niu Minhua	Non-partisan

Table 1. the chief directors of WAC departments and their political backgrounds, 1938⁷⁹

The reorganization and expansion of the WAC marked the institutionalization of the women's united front for national salvation and resistance. And a declaration of women's unity was formally made by Madame Chiang at the Lushan Women's Summit:

Today gathered together are the most eminent women intellectuals and elites, who are the leaders of Chinese women. All of us have undertaken different work in society to help our country achieve the final victory. We all shoulder great responsibilities for leading Chinese women from all walks of life...

If all Chinese women are willing to unite and to influence our nation with our *esprit de corps*, I believe all our compatriots will abolish prejudice and unite for the interests of the nation [...] I am confident that through the WAC, we will be able to fulfil our responsibilities and achieve our goals.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *Nanfangju dangshi ziliao 5 (The Historical Documents of the CCP South Bureau, Volume 5)*, Chongqing Press, 1986, pp. 464-465.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ 'Lushan funü tanhuahui kaimuci' (The opening speech at the Lushan Women's Summit). *Women's Life*, vol. 6, issue 3, 1938, in *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao – minguo zhengfu juan 1912-1949 (Historical*

By integrating their networks into the WAC and by undertaking larger responsibilities for mobilising, educating and training more women to save the nation from its deep crisis, Chinese elite women further proclaimed their leadership in national salvation and resistance, and enhanced their positions of authority. It is evident that, through forging a women's united front, Shen Ziju, Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang and their peers not only became salvationists, but also grew to be the real leaders, mediators and experts of different fields in wartime mobilization and popular resistance. Their growing salvation networks, which were not confined to any party framework hence bridging the different political sides, played an important role in the establishment of the WNSAs in Shanghai and Nanjing and the reorganization of the WAC in Wuhan. And as the War of Resistance stretched on in the 1940s, their networks continued to channel Chinese women's independent social and political activism, beyond the geo-political borders of wartime China.

Conclusions

From a school teacher in Songjiang, to the chief editor of *Women's Life* in Shanghai and then to the WNSA and the WAC leader in Wuhan, Shen Ziju, as well as the other elite women of her kind, empowered themselves in the enlarging cultural, social and political spaces for national salvation and resistance in 1930s China. From Shanghai and Nanjing to Wuhan, these elite women – as the previously marginalized social and political groups under the KMT's rule such as teachers and journalists, housewives and concubines, undercover communists and even Shanghai's infamous gangsters – connected their networks and gained political leverage during the national salvation movement. Despite their diverse origins, patrons and agendas, these networks not only facilitated the dissemination of women's voices and concerns for the nation's future, but also enhanced the communication between political parties and the ties across different regions.

Having expanded and integrated their networks first into the Women's National Salvation Association and two years later in the Women's Advisory Council, Chinese elite women gradually formed a women's leadership in the national salvation movement and called for a women's united front at a local and then national level. The convergence of their attitudes and actions as they migrated from Shanghai and Nanjing to Wuhan in 1938 was not a sudden one born out of political convenience. Nor was it merely the product of top-down party decision making. Rather, as this article has shown, it had its origins in the relatively inclusive social and political milieus in China's metropolises in the early 1930s, where elite women from various backgrounds had already taken the initiatives to network with one another and to protest the social and political *status quo*, long before the official alliance between the KMT and the CCP was established. The birth and evolution of their united front were not only marked by their persistent challenges of the boundary between private and public

spheres, but also by their consistent communication, negotiation and cooperation beyond party lines, and across the geographic borders of wartime China.

However, despite their call for a sweeping women's united front that 'mobilizes all women of the nation', the actual one forged among these émigré elites from the urban sites of eastern China to the hinterland was not a class-blind institution. The elitist mode of communication maintained among these women professionals and activists – through their reading and publishing societies, forums, research seminars and casual social events – distanced the large population of working-class and peasant women. Benefited from their professions, hence a good personal financial situation, Shen Ziji, Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang and their peers could afford the time and cost to organize various forums, attend meetings and parties in order to keep and refresh their contacts. Like in Shanghai where they held their get-togethers at the Godly restaurant, in Wuhan they also met regularly at the YWCA or the city's numerous cafés, sometimes for talks and seminars given by famous scholars, and sometimes simply for dinners or small-scale tea parties among friends. While the urban spaces and the intellectual circles have become so essential to elite women's communication and networking, it was inevitable that the less educated working-class and peasant women were largely left out.

Having examined the social networks in Shanghai during the national salvation movement, Coble concludes that 'the array of non-governmental organizations was a relatively new phenomenon in China and one which would not last. The outbreak of war in 1937 and the occupation by Japan was the beginning of the end.'⁸¹ However, 1937 was clearly not the 'beginning of the end' for the wartime organization and activism of those elite women we have explored in this article, who, after the fall of Shanghai and Nanjing, expanded and integrated their networks first in Wuhan, and later in Chongqing, the wartime capital of the Nationalist government between 1938 and 1946. During China's eight-year war against Japan, Madame Chiang, popular not only at home but also overseas, was acclaimed as a symbol of women's power, achievement and war effort in Chongqing. As the head of the WAC and the leader of national resistance, she was hailed by American newspapers as representing 'the advancements women were making into positions of authority'.⁸² Long forgotten, however, were Madame Chiang's friends, colleagues and also her one-time enemies – those prominent elite women hailing from different political and professional backgrounds who had already joined forces and forged a women's united front for national salvation before the war. This women's united front, in this regard, provided Madame Chiang and the Nationalist government with crucial social and political resources for consolidating authority during China's War of Resistance against Japan, at both national and global levels.

⁸¹ Coble, 'The National Salvation Movement and Social Networks in Republic China Shanghai', p. 117.

⁸² T. C. Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931-1949*, Stanford University Press, California, 1999, p. 97.